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By Kimberly Houghton

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NASHUA – America's newest fighter jet was praised on Thursday as state politicians stepped into the cockpit of an F-35 demonstrator and piloted the simulator now on display at BAE Systems.

Lockheed Martin is developing the F-35 fighter jet with industrial partners Northrop Grumman and BAE Systems. Parts for the advanced stealth aircraft are made locally at BAE Systems by New Hampshire residents.

The \$65 million aircraft is expected to replace the F-16 and F-18 fighter jets by 2016, starting with about 200 jets per year.

Overall, about 3,000 F-35 jets are planned for production, with 63 already completed, according to Robert Rubino, director of the U.S. Navy F-35 program.

"The F-35 program is on track and is gaining momentum," Rubino told a crowd of media gathered at BAE Systems for Thursday's cockpit demonstration.

The U.S. Air Force, Marines and Navy pilots need fifth-generation capabilities with stealth technology, or there will be the threat of obsolete aircraft, said Rubino.

As China and Russia continue to work on new generations of aircraft, the United States must do the same to adequately defend the country, said U.S. Senator Jeanne Shaheen, who had the opportunity to pilot the F-35 demonstrator.

Admitting that there are challenges to the program, the Democrat said she will continue to advocate for the modern F-35 jets.

She said they are critical for national security, regardless of the federal funding hurdle.

"The need is apparent," agreed Tom Arsenault, president of the electronic solutions business within BAE Systems. Other aircraft is limited and aging, according to Arsenault, who said parts for the new F-35s are being built by 4,800 New Hampshire workers.

BAE Systems is proud to be a part of the program, which is designed to help make American soldiers come home safely, he added.

Congressman Charlie Bass, who also had the opportunity to get behind the cockpit simulator, said he was amazed by the simplicity of the cockpit's panel, despite the complex tasks involved in aerial missions.

"This will be our primary means of defense," Republican Bass predicted of the F-35s, stressing

America must continue to work hard to remain a strong, vital and competitive nation.

Perhaps the most visually appealing task of the F-35 is its ability to land vertically.

It can also operate in virtually any battle situation and is suited for air-to-air or air-to-ground electronic warfare, BAE officials said.

According to its website, the new F-35, complete with fighter speed and agility, will help combat terrorism by sharing information with allied aircraft, ships and troops on the ground.

U.S. pilots are already engaging in the F-35 flight test program, as the first F-35s were delivered to bases this past summer.

The flight test phase is about 20 percent complete, according to Rubino.